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'Lads' Mags', Young Men's Attitudes towards Women and Acceptance of Myths about Sexual Aggression

Maddy COY and Miranda A.H. HORVATH

BACKGROUND

This commentary is a precursor to a forthcoming study exploring young men's consumption of 'lads' mags' – lifestyle magazines aimed at young men that feature young women in sexualized poses – specifically, their implications for men's attitudes towards women and sexual aggression. Here we give an overview of existing research that has informed our research questions, in order to initiate discussions about the impacts of lads' mags on male readers.

We argue that in an increasingly sexualized media environment, lads' mags serve as a powerful tool in the mainstreaming of sexist images and ideals. Whilst we acknowledge the complexity of debates on whether sexually explicit materials cause individuals to be more violent/aggressive, we propose that there is nevertheless merit in exploring lads' mags as a genre that affects readers' perceptions of, and attitudes towards, women, sex and sexuality.

LADS' MAGS AS A GENRE

In this commentary we use the term 'lads' mags' to reflect our focus on UK-based titles *Loaded*, *Nuts*, *Zoo* and *FHM* (*For Him Magazine*). While some lads' mags titles are available in Australia (for example *RALPH*, *Zoo* and *FHM*), Thailand and Scandinavia (*Monkey*), they appear to be primarily a UK and US media phenomenon. They are popular and accessible media sources in contemporary youth culture, and constitute a key element of what is often referred to as the 'sexualization of popular culture' (see Gill, 2007, 2008; Levy, 2005). Content is typified by notions that Rosalind Gill (2007) defines as a post-feminist media sensibility characterized by an idea that women can use their bodies for profit as

a means to power; emphasizing the importance of individual choice; and focusing on biological differences between men and women.

All types of men's lifestyle magazines are relatively new. As Rogers identifies 'in the mid-1980s, publishers were doubtful about the possibility of introducing a formula to unite men's interests' (2005: 179). However in the early 1990s *Loaded* (launched in the UK in 1994), signalled the advent of a new genre in lifestyle magazines aimed at young men. Subsequent publications such as *Nuts* and *Zoo* have combined circulation figures of approximately half a million copies every week with a target readership of 18–30 year olds (Turner, 2005). In the USA, the leading men's magazine, *Maxim*, has a circulation of nearly 2.5 million (Karges, 2005). While in the UK the term 'lads' mags' differentiates the style and content from previously existing men's lifestyle magazines, even these demarcations have become blurred; as Benwell (2004) points out, the launch of lads' mags has led to the 'older' generation of men's magazines shifting their content towards increasing sexualization. Magazines such as *GQ* and *Esquire* that were positioned as 'upmarket' have become more reliant on 'babes and boobs' and a more hedonistic, predatory construction of masculinity (Stevenson et al., 2003: 121).

The cumulative impact of sexualization in popular culture, referred to by Brown et al. (2006) as a 'sexy media diet' forms a backdrop where lads' mags are just one constituent, and arguably have a narrower audience than, say, advertising billboards. This noted, we wish to focus attention on lads' mags for three reasons. First, the widespread acceptance and availability of lads' mags in the UK introduces them to generations of boys and young men. This is of particular note given that boys and young men are a group for whom sources of information about sexuality are particularly limited (Buckingham and Bragg, 2002). Research demonstrates that young people, particularly boys, who are exposed to sexualized media are likely to perceive women to be sex objects (Peter and Valkenburg, 2007). Evidence also shows that sexualized representations of girls and women lead to negative personal and social outcomes for girls and women, such as damage to body image, sense of self, diminished educational aspiration and achievement, and pressure to conform to young men's expectations of sexual availability (see American Psychological Association, 2007; Coy, in press). For feminist researchers, this sharpens the call to examine how men's attitudes and behaviours are influenced as a result of consuming a 'sexy media diet' (Brown et al., 2006).

Second, the possible impact of lads' mags on readers has attracted media commentary and become a current focus of debate for politicians and policy makers. For example, in the UK a 2007 Ofsted¹ report suggested that 'while at times reinforcing sexist attitudes' lads' mags provide a positive source of information for young people (OFSTED, 2007), suggesting that the potential negative effects of lads' mags are minimal and not a cause for concern. Conversely, Labour Member of Parliament (MP) Claire Curtis-Thomas presented a Bill to Parliament in 2006 attempting to restrict their display in shops, and Conservative party leader David Cameron has expressed concern over lads' mags fuelling a culture

of youth violence.² Most recently, a report with cross party support from British MPs recommended that lads' mags and newspapers featuring topless photographs of women be given age-appropriate '16' and '18' certificates. The report surveyed sixth-form students (17–18 years old) and found that all the girls who viewed *Zoo* and *Nuts* were angry, offended or upset by the images of women (Jakubowicz and McClelland, 2008). Similarly, in the USA, Walmart stopped selling *Maxim*, *Stuff* and *FHM* in 2003 on the basis that shoppers were offended by the sexualized imagery of women on the covers (Carr and Hayes, 2003). Our third motivation is that lads' mags are often depicted as 'just a bit of harmless fun', partly because of their light-hearted 'ironic' tone (Benwell, 2004). Critique is therefore often blocked, in part because of this editorial style of lads' mags and in part because of the normalization of sexualized imagery in popular culture. We contend, however, that the centrality of sexualized imagery may influence attitudes to women in harmful ways, and thus cannot be defended as harmless entertainment.

In summary, our key research question in both this commentary and the planned research project is what perceptions of women and sexuality do readers of lads' mags hold? While we hope to explore connections between frequent/occasional consumption of lads' mags and attitudes to sexual aggression, we acknowledge that the direction of this relationship is knotty – do men seek sexualized/sextist imagery to bolster existing value bases about women or does such material inculcate sexist attitudes? We draw on existing research on consumption of sexualized material to illustrate some of the complexities and tensions in this field.

RESEARCH ON LADS' MAGS

Content analysis of lads' mags demonstrates that the prominent themes are of female nudity and self-centred sexual pleasure seeking (Krassas et al., 2003; Object, 2006; Taylor, 2005), limiting representation of women to 'the reductively sexual' (Tincknell et al., 2003). For instance, issues of UK-based publication *Nuts* typically feature over 70 images of women, with a third topless (Turner, 2005). In US magazines *Maxim* and *Stuff*, women are likely to be depicted as decorative, and/or touching themselves and overall as sexual objects in 80 per cent of images (Krassas et al., 2003). Expressions of sexuality in lads' mags consistently privilege a male sexual drive discourse (Hollway, 1984), manifested in themes of multiple partners, women as sexual prey and sexual consumerism (Krassas et al., 2003). Thus, gendered sexual scripts are re-inscribed and normalized (Menard and Kleinplatz, 2008).

Taylor's (2005) study of articles about sex in *Maxim*, *Stuff* and *FHM* in the USA confirms these findings. He concluded that such articles are highly heteronormative, frequently accompanied by sexualized images of women, and endorse typically masculine sexual norms. Although the most popular subject for articles was 'what women want', this content was based around securing sexual rewards for men. Significantly, the images accompanying articles may serve a role 'to

activate stereotypes about women as sex objects; these stereotypes would then be expected to influence how readers understand what they read' (Taylor, 2005: 162).

There is, however, limited empirical knowledge of how readers make sense of the discourses of female sexual availability that are featured in lads' mags and how the consumption of this material may or may not impact on their attitudes towards women.

PARALLELS WITH PORNOGRAPHY?

Trouble is the lads' mags blur this line [between fantasy and reality], especially those who feature 'real' girls and girlfriends. Presumably even the girls in the lads' mags want to say 'no' from time to time. The thing is in the mags they never do. (Lads' mag journalist, cited in *Object*, 2006, italics in original)

Although our proposed research is informed by a recognition of the differences between lads' mags and pornography, there are also similarities between the two genres. There are parallels between lads' mags and pornography that should not be ignored. Whelehan points out that lads' mags 'borrow conventions directly from porn' (2000: 31), and are manifestations of the mainstreaming of pornography into the mass media (see Gill, 2008). Taylor also argues that both pornography and lads' mags seem to 'promote a powerful-aggressive male sexuality' (2006: 695). For example, lads' mags often feature strategies for manipulating women to obtain sexual compliance (Taylor, 2005) and in pornographic magazines, images often show women as victims of sexual coercion (Matacin and Burger, 1987).

Questions of how men formulate attitudes to women and sexual aggression have been explored in relation to pornographic material, including print magazines. While a simple causal relationship has not been found, numerous studies have found links between frequent exposure to pornographic magazines and greater sexual aggression (e.g. Malamuth et al., 2000). Research with men exposed to images of women in advertising by Lanis and Covell (1995) found them to be significantly more accepting of rape-supportive attitudes where women are depicted as 'sex objects' rather than in 'progressive roles'.

Taylor (2006), in contrast, found that neither reading pornographic magazines or lads' mags was related to aggressive attitudes towards women. One possible explanation for this (that Taylor also acknowledges) may be the sample he used: a convenience sample of undergraduate students in a prestigious public university in America. It is possible that the social norms of this group (at least outwardly) oppose violence against women, concealing the effects of the magazines (Taylor, 2006).

In addition to the complexities of tracing causal relationships, simplistic comparisons obscure the differences both in content and presentation. That images in lads' mags fall short of total nudity precludes their classification as pornography (Krassas et al., 2003). Rogers argues that 'the glamorous, exciting images in

Loaded and FHM provide a genre of “almost porn” (2005: 185). They are marketed to readers with a more mainstream and socioculturally respectable remit, addressing ‘masculine’ interests such as sport, alcohol and cars. It is precisely this point that underpins our research questions. The more mainstream position that lads’ mags occupy in contemporary media signifies a need to study them as a genre in their own right. In short, similarities between pornography and lads’ mags exist in terms of representations of women as sexual objects, but the framing of the latter as a normalized media source may have different implications for how readers interpret the content.

FUTURE ENQUIRIES

In this commentary we have reviewed existing literature and highlighted the need for research focused specifically on how the content of sexualized imagery in lads’ mags influences young men’s perceptions of women and sexuality. Sharing concern with others about the ubiquity of sexualized images of women, particularly through mainstream media sources, we are embarking on research to explore how men who read lads’ mags perceive women, sexuality and sexual aggression. How representations of women as sexual objects contribute to sexual violence and wider global gender inequality is an issue of the greatest importance.

NOTES

1. OFSTED inspects and regulates care for children and young people, and inspects education and training for learners of all ages (see <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/>).
2. Speech to military personnel at Brize Norton village, UK, 24 August 2007.

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